Practical Wisdom

Two kinds of Reason
1. Pure theoretical reason: grasps truths about eternal laws of the universe.
2. Practical reason: deals with what is temporal and variable, and counsels us of the rational course of action.

Prudence vs. Theoretical wisdom
*Prudence*: is concerned with particulars-particular situations and particular actions- about what to do in particular to reach a goal
*Theoretical wisdom*: concerned with universal, external truths. It requires general rules.
- Mathematics: theorems and axioms (1st principles)

Prudence (Practical Wisdom)
Virtue of Character: State which decides a mean relative to us, as decided by the prudent.
- Prudence: Excellence in deliberation and decision making (VI, p. 92)

What Does a Prudent Person Do?
1. Aims at overall good achievable in action
2. Understands what it requires in particular
3. And decides accordingly.

Prudence vs. Cleverness
*Cleverness*: Good at calculating the means to an end. However, the end is incorrect.
*Prudence*: Good at calculating the means. The end is always correct.

How do prudent persons make decisions?
Prudence: makes decision through:

a) Reasoned sensitivity to particular situations and the overall good achievable in action
b) Understanding (perceiving) relevant factors in particular situation and what to do in it
c) Much experience in decision making
d) Reflection on past decisions of self/others.

Hypothesis: No infallible general rules common theme.
- Habitation in virtue → practice in deliberation. = Prudence

Q1: Aren’t prudent just reflecting/rationalizing the practice of themselves/ their culture

The prudent person’s models are parents, friends, environment etc. How does s/he get beyond her/his society then? How can Aristotle avoid being a relativist?

Aristotle’s expected answer:
A: need correct starting points, fine desires, habits, practices, and true belief (p.3) to become prudent. Is this a satisfying answer?
Epistemological Problems
Q1: How do I know I am not a brain in a vat or being deceived by Descartes’ evil
demon?

Q2: How do we know we aren’t living in a vicious fool’s paradise, rationalizing vice as
virtue?

Aristotle: it is enough that
   (a) We are well brought up and
   (b) Using capacities whose natural functions is to tell us what highest good is and
what to do.
   • As long as we know our eyes are functioning well, it is enough. That is what
counts.

Q3: But how do we justify our views, and decisions to others who don’t share our way of
living/starting point? C/f Paul Bernald)

Aristotle: We should only share with people who share our starting point. Ethics requires
some common ground between A and B.

Modern Philosophers: justify morality by appeal to:
   a) Minimal desire we all share (Hobbes) Desire of death is universally shared.-
something that represents a common ground for all human beings
   b) Principle of rationality or reasoning no one can deny. (Kant)

Aristotle; Prudence requires
   a) All virtues of character and
   b) So, one cannot have one virtue without the rest (p. 99)

Objection: Surely, a person can be honest, without being brave generous without being
just etc.
   • A strong and extraordinary claim not consistent with common sense.

Response (Aristotle)
Natural Virtues vs. Full/Strict Virtues
Natural Virtues: if you have one (or some) you are naturally virtuous but not fully
virtuous.
Full Virtue: this is reserved for the prudent person; a person who possesses all ethical
virtues

Q: Aristotle maintains that all virtuous acts require practical wisdom and deliberation.
Yet, he insists that all natural virtues are virtues that involve no deliberation and practical
reasoning. Is he contradicting himself?

Does his distinction between natural and full virtues help him to dissolve the apparent
contradiction?